

The Basques of Oregon*

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Ada H. Hedges-ek hegomendebaldeko Oregongo euskaldunez, haien jatorriaz eta kulturaz idatzi du. Mendearen hasieran familia osoen emigrazioa abiatu zen, eta egun 15-20.000 biztanleko herriguneetan bildu dira. Haien eguneroko bizitzak eta artzainak jostatzen diren moldeak arreta erakutzen dute. Eskola da amerikartzeko "bulego" bakarra.

Ada H. Hedges escribe sobre los vascos en el sudoeste de Oregón, sus orígenes y su cultura. A principios de siglo se inició la emigración de familias enteras, que al presente se agrupan en núcleos de entre 15 y 20.000 personas. Su vida cotidiana y la forma como se divierten los pastores son objeto de atención. La escuela es la única "oficina" de americanización.

Ada H. Hedges présente les Basques du Sud-Ouest de l'Oregon, leur origine et leur culture. Des migrations de familles entières commencèrent au début du siècle; les établissements actuels regroupent 15 à 20.000 personnes. Elle évoque ensuite la vie quotidienne et les loisirs des bergers. L'école est la seule "agence" d'américanisation.

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The Basque sheep herder, singing his native Spanish songs as he tends his flocks, lends a glamorous touch to the gray sagebrush hills of southeastern Oregon. For this remote region harbors a strange and interesting people, one of the most picturesque of all Oregon. They crossed a sea and a continent to find in the wild Steens Mountain territory the conditions suitable for the grazing of sheep, the most ancient calling of the old-world Basque.

The Basques have always been a people apart, loving solitude, and remaining true to their racial traditions and customs. Since the dawn of history, as descendents of a tribe which inhabited Spain before the Celts, they have dwelt in their mountain fastnesses about the Pyrenees. The origin of this race is lost in obscurity, but it is an accepted fact that they were established in their mountains of Spain before the Aryans came to Europe. A romantic theory of their beginnings is suggested by one authority who believes that the Basques were cradled in the lost continent of Atlantis. Some anthropologists consider them a linguistic and social rather than a racial group. At any rate, they are a separate division of the human family that has preserved its existence, identity, and language longer than any other European group. Living between France and Spain without becoming a part of either nation, their claim to being the oldest unmixed race in Europe, retaining relatively pure national and physical characteristics, seems to be founded in fact. Authorities state that the average height of the native Basque is five feet, four and one-half inches. This trait indicated that unlike other race, their stature has not increased. The American Basques, however, are taller than their ancestors. This mystery race has no traditions of its origin, but it is known to have had written laws and a distinct literature as early as the fifth century.

The freedom-loving people refused to stay conquered when they were annexed to Caesar's empire in 56 B.D., and were granted self-government. Entrenched in their mountains, they saw the Romans depart, defended their homes against Goth, Vandal, and Saracen, and turned back the armies of Charlemagne, 779, A.D. In the eleventh century they maintained a republic. Henry IV of France permitted them to remain independent of the crown of France and sanctioned a separate government. Spanish royal orders were of no force in the Basque provinces, and the Basques made their own treaty with England and France. The bold free life of the Spanish Main appealed to the Basques, and as some of the most famous corsairs, they sailed the seven seas.

The typical Basque, of which Marshall Foch was said to be a good example, has a remarkably clear skin, sparkling dark or blue eyes, a warm smile, and strong white teeth gleaming through the reddest of lips. The women are noted for their dark beauty, which is heightened by the bright colors of their native dress, and the graceful lace mantilla, intriguingly draped over high combs in the Spanish fashion.

The Basques speak their native Eskuara, a very ancient tongue that bears little relation to any other known language, though some of the words betray an Egyptian likeness. The characters of this language, an enigma to philologists, are Roman. If they are educated, the Basques also speak Castilian and French. Eskuara is a smoothly flowing tongue with many final vowels, said to be the strangest of all languages of Europe. The verb habitually includes all pronouns, adverbs, and other allied parts of speech, some persons having 50 forms. It is little wonder that French peasants said that the devil studied the Basque language for seven years and learned only two words. He was therefore unable to interfere in their

religious faith. It is also said that the Basque is happy in his speech since it is so distinctly his own, and few aliens can master it.

It would be difficult to think of any portion of the United States better adapted to a people loving liberty and solitude than the remote regions of Malheur and Harney counties of Oregon and the adjacent section of Idaho. The creeks and small lakes supply water, and the soil supports different varieties of native grass, and the climate is dry. The Basques are identified with a sweep of country stretching for about 300 miles between Crane, Oregon and Winnemucca, Nevada. The general topography of this high sagebrush desert guards their isolation and gives them unhampered freedom and ideal conditions in the pursuit of their pastoral calling. It was here they found what they were seeking when for economic reasons they left their homes.

According to one account, a Basque sea captain came to San Francisco, in the 1870's, and found his way to Winnemucca by the new railroad. He remained in the grazing section, made his fortune, and then returned to Spain to spread the tidings of a great sheep country in the New World. Another account states that ambitious young men entered the country by way of Ellis Island and drifted across the continent in search of a promised land. Both stories are probably correct.

A Basque who made his headquarters at Boise, Idaho for 50 years died, in 1928, at the age of 96. For years he had been a packer and a pack train master. This would indicate that there were Basques in the region earlier than their recorded appearance in Oregon. In the early 1880's, they began to take up their occupation of sheep-raising in the southwestern Oregon plateaus and the valleys about the Owyhee River and displaced the Mexican herders to whom they were superior. One of the first Basque settlers of the Jordan Creek Valley was Augustine B. Azcuenaga, who arrived about 1880. He took up sheep growing on a large scale, and later became the owner of the Motel in the town of Jordan Valley. The real Basque migration did not begin until after the turn of the century, when whole clans were brought out, a few at a time. The members increased until the immigration law went into effect. Many came just because their fortunes were made or because of a depression in the stock raising industry.

Today, the principal Basque settlements are at Jordan Valley, with a population of about 200, a village 30 miles south of Ontario; at Andrews, about 100 miles south of Crane; at Fields, 15 miles beyond, and at McDermitt, with a population of 150, just on the Oregon-Nevada line, and in other scattered settlements about the Steens and Blue Mountains. In all, they number between 15,000 and 20,000 colonists. Jordan Valley and McDermitt, originally settled by Americans, have become Basque communities with a true Spanish atmosphere. At Jordan Valley, the Basque dwellings are native stone; at McDermitt, a number of the houses are of white-washed cement, with bright trims of apple-green, or sky-blue, and red tile roofs, more striking for the strong desert sunlight. The gay houses are in vivid contrast to the gray wastes in the background and the dark escarpments of the abruptly-rising mountains to the south.

If the traveler weary of the rough and never-ending roads of the Oregon Basque country should happen upon one of the small-roomed Basque dwellings, built of native stone in the Pyrenean manner, to insure heat in winter and coolness in summer, he will find a welcome. Strange foods, perhaps *chorres-so*, or Basque sausage, goat's milk and cheese, and dark

bread may be set before him, but in a spirit of hospitality, friendly if not too marked, since these people are usually reticent with those not of their own race. These Basque ranches are careless places, of few women, but with hordes of dark young men about, and overrun with dogs. A huge pile of sagebrush in the dooryard reminds one that wood is not obtainable in this desert country. But no matter how drab the surroundings, the family and the kinsmen in the brightly-painted rooms, among themselves, are a laughing and happy-hearted as any of these children of the south.

At Jordan Valley, the most typical of the Basque settlements, the traveler will find an old-world atmosphere, and he will forget for the time the desert miles before and behind him. A Sunday visitor to the village found "dashing mounted vaqueros, with fringed chaps and tilting sombreros, caracoling up the street on spirited ponies and strolling young ladies with a vivacity of natural charm and dress".

The names of the residents add to the feeling that one is very remote from all things American: Carmen Guerricagoltia, Tomasa Corta, Pilar Eizaguirre, Alfonso Acrodegotia, Emilia Chertudi, Jesus Arristola, Demaso Cortabitarte, the pronunciation of which no American attempts.

The Basques are highly successful sheepmen. They follow the sheep through generations, since by temperament they are suited to the lonely life of sheepherding. The typical Basque herder is a picturesque figure, usually a mere boy with dark features and brooding eyes. On his back he carries his blanket roll, at his side is his desert water bag, and in his hand his faithful staff. During the summer, the gleam of distant fires on the silent hills tells of the solitary bivouacs of herders such as he. Perhaps for many weeks no one has come near him but the camp tender, who brings the supplies from the home ranch on the back of a burro.

After an arduous day of following the sheep over rough hillsides, and keeping the flocks together, he makes his bed on the ground. About him are the mysterious noises of the desert night, the faint rustlings among the animals, and an occasional cry of coyote. The slightest vibration of the earth, made by a footfall, or an unusual stir of the sheep will arouse his listening shepherd sense. He fires his gun, and sends his dog around the frightened flock. For he does not guard the sheep alone. The sheep dog is also alert to keep his charges safe from the prowlers of the night.

The herder could not carry on his work without this active monitor of the flock. His dog is always an important part of the picture. In Oregon, the favored breed is the Australian sheep dog, a small agile type, suited to quick motions over rough country. With gray, non-descript coats, and unmatched eyes, these dogs are somewhat weird. As dogs go, they are insignificant specimens, but in reality they are highly intelligent and highly trained. Without these timid, patient little creatures a great industry could not be carried on. They hold the bands together, round up the laggards, edge them back from the rimrock, guard them night and day, and all without very much direction.

It is no small task to keep a band of 2,000 sheep together, and once separated, they cannot be united without great difficulty. It is an important work to be entrusted to a youth who often has the entire fortune of his kinsman under his control. But he tends the flocks, as those before him, living a life of almost complete isolation, existing frugally and saving his earnings. With his characteristic acumen, he will eventually buy an interest in the sheep, work on still more years until he

can invest in a ranch, and become an owner. He will then send for a brother, nephew, or a fellow townsman to take his place at the herding, and the cycle will be repeated.

In Oregon, the sheep are grazed up the slopes of Steens Mountain, really a range of mountains, 50 miles long, following the grass to the higher elevations as the season advances. In the fall, the flocks are brought down again, with their coats ready to take on the winter thickness. In the spring, they go through the shearing plants, the dipping tanks, and are again ready to go out into the hills.

Away from their work the Basques are a gay people, dancing, playing the guitar or accordion or harp, and singing in their musical voices. In lighter moments they are likely to be gathered around the village plaza in pastimes that bring the color of Old Spain to the drab wilderness. They not only dance American dances, but they have retained their graceful folk dances. Among their primitive dances, some of which were taken over by the Romans, were the vintage dance, sword dance, and the weaving dance, from which we take our maypole dance. They are also related to the Egyptian ritual.

The pioneer generation of Oregon has kept alive these racial traditions, engaging in their old festivities on such occasions as their three important holidays, Christmas, New Year's, and Three King's Day. The latter is observed on January 6, a legendary feast day originally set aside in honor of the only three kings in the world. When fortunate enough to witness them, visitors have described the Basques in holiday mood. While some of them play their native instruments, others stand in a circle with their hands on each other's shoulders and sing. Plaintive Spanish songs, melodious Basque airs, and old French folk songs echo over the rimrock. One traveler to Jordan Valley pictures a modern occasion: "after a Basque dinner the entire population assembled in the community hall and gave a Basque dance in our honor. The snapping fingers, gaiety, merry-making, and frequent bursts of song that accompanied the dances flowed from the deep roots of their ancient heritage". Since the older dances such as the *Fandango* are being taught to the children, it is hoped that these old customs will not die out, though the Americanized generation is not so interested in them as the passing generation relinquishes its traditions to a changing order. An organization with headquarters at Boise has for one of its purposes the preservation of old dances, customs, and music. Though they play their own card games, there is no gambling, and though they drink wine, they do not drink it to excess. A quaint art of the Basque, when he is out in the hills with his companions, is to drink from a wine flask without touching it to his lips, the straw-sized stream of claret is directed with no disaster into each uplifted mouth.

The Basques have brought their national game of handball, *pelota*, with them. It is a game played by two, four, or six players in which the ball is thrown by hand against a stone wall, and somewhat after the manner of American tennis. One of the three courts in America is at Jordan Valley. The other two are at Boise.

If the Basques are a gypsy, outdoor, happy-hearted race, they are also industrious and courteous. The poise has long been noted. They are reticent and strangely proud because they have lived many centuries as one race. They seem to be in their own minds superior even to the type of American with whom their lot is cast. Their thrift and energy and peace-loving natures make them good citizens, and they often become

leaders in community enterprises. The pioneer Basques as a rule did not enjoy full American citizenship. They took out only their first naturalization papers in order to hold property.

The school is the only Americanizing agency and through it the younger generation becomes American. The teachers find the Basque children unable to speak a word of English. It takes about a year for them to become familiar enough with the language to make much progress in their studies.

In religion the Basques are Catholic. At Jordan Valley they have their own church and priest who conducts the services in the Basque language. The entire Basque family attends the service, all the little girls in spotless and stiffly starched white. It is told that the first marriage ceremony performed in Oregon could not be conducted until the ritual was forwarded from Salt Lake, since the couple, to their way of thinking could be married only by their own rites. Since the Basque men outnumber the women, the Basque men intermarry with

American women, but the Basque girls rarely marry outside their own race.

"Every Basque a noble", is a saying that is not questioned by those who have known these people in their adopted habitation. Their devotion to a tradition has helped to build up a great industry. They have replaced one romantic sheep with another, and have added their own color to landscapes that would be bleak without them. The grazing of sheep in this region will probably be in their hands for generations to come, though the younger Basques sometimes take up other work. It is to be hoped that these strange and mysterious people will be tending their flocks on the hills of Oregon for many years. They lend dignity to this occupation and make it a tribal calling. A racial ideal is preserved in one of their old songs:

"Far nobler on our mountains is he that yokes the ox, And equal to a monarch, the shepherd of the flocks".